

Message Text

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SUBJECT: THAI POLITICAL CLIMATE AND US MILITARY PRESENCE

REF: STATE 073142

1. IN REPLY TO THE QUESTION PARA 2 REFTEL, WE BELIEVE THAT WHILE THAI CONCERNS ABOUT US STEADFASTNESS WOULD BE REKINDLED BY A RAPID AND SIZEABLE FORCE REDUCTION, THIS WOULD NOT OCCUR IN THE CASE OF A VERY MODEST PHASE DOWN. THE THAIS WOULD CERTAINLY NOT WANT US TO DIMINISH OUR RESOURCES TO THE POINT WHERE THIS WOULD REDUCE OUR GENERAL STRIKE/ DETERRENCE CAPACITY AND THEY WOULD WANT US TO MAINTAIN OUR CAPABILITY TO BACK UP A STRONG POLITICAL STANCE VIS- A- VIS HANOI. HOWEVER, THEY WOULD ACCEPT OUR JUDGMENT AS TO WHAT

IS NECESSARY AND WOULD SEE A VERY MODEST FORCE DRAW- DOWN, ACCOMPANIED BY A PUBLIC AFFAIRS SCENARIO CAREFULLY WORKED OUT TO MAKE IT CLEAR THAT THIS WOULD BE BASED ON CURRENT MILITARY REQUIREMENTS (AND COULD BE QUICKLY REVERSED, IF NECESSARY) AS CONSISTENT WITH DEPFONMIN CHARTCHAI' S POINT (ALSO MADE BY PRO- MINENT PUBLISHER KUKRIT AND OTHERS) THAT US FORCES ARE NOT TO BE HERE FOREVER. EVEN THOUGH RTG TAKES POSITION THAT THE US PRESENCE IS NOT AN OBSTACLE TO RAPPROCHEMENT WITH PEKING AND HANOI, DOMESTIC CRITICS AND OTHER GOVERNMENTS IN THE REGION, NOTABLY MALAYSIA, DIFFER. BELIEVE MODEST ACTION TO REDUCE OUR PRESENCE SLIGHTLY AND RELATING SIZE OF OUR PRESENCE DIRECTLY TO THE JOB AT HAND, IN THE CONTEXT OUTLINED ABOVE AND APPROPRIATELY TIMED, WOULD NOT SHAKE THAI CONFIDENCE, BUT RATHER BE REGARDED AS A STEP IN TUNE WITH THAILAND' LONGER RANGE OBJECTIVES AND

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WITH WHAT LEADING THAI OFFICIALS THEMSELVES HAVE BEEN SAYING.

2. IN THIS CONNECTION, THERE HAVE BEEN NO NOTABLE SHIFTS IN ARTICULATE THAI OPINION RE US MILITARY PRESENCE. LATTER CONTINUES TO COME IN FOR A GOOD DEAL OF ATTENTION, SOME OF IT CRITICAL, SOME CONSTRUCTIVELY POINTING TO ECONOMIC AND SECURITY ADVANTAGES. WHILE SUBJECT APPEARED TO HAVE SUBSIDED SOMEWHAT AS AN ISSUE IN PUBLIC DEBATE DURING PAST FEW WEEKS, IT CONTINUED AS ONE OF THE MAJOR UNDERLYING THEMES IN CONSIDERATION OF FOREIGN POLICY, ESPECIALLY REGIONAL MATTERS. IN THAT CONTEXT IT CAME UP IN BEHIND- THE- SCENES DISCUSSION, ALBEIT INCONCLUSIVELY, AT RECENT ASEAN MEETING WHICH, BY BARELY PAYING LIP SERVICE TO NEUTRALIZATION CONCEPT (BANGKOK 6179), AVOIDED TAKING POSITION ON FOREIGN TROOP PRESENCE IN MEMBER COUNTRIES.

3. SUBJECT REAPPEARED THIS WEEK IN PRESS WITH STRIDENT STATEMENTS BY EX- FONMIN THANAT WHO REITERATED HIS WELL- KNOWN AND OUTSPOKEN CRITICISM OF RTG POLICY IN ACCOMMODATING US FORCES AND ALSO ACCUSED US OF DUPLICITY IN DEPLOYMENT OF US MARINES IN 1962 (BANGKOK 6747 AND 6728). EARLIER, NATIONAL STUDENT LEADER PROMISED TO CARRY ON AGITATION AGAINST US PRESENCE (BANGKOK 6431). SOME STIRRINGS AT THE UNIVERSITIES MUST BE EXPECTED WITH START OF NEW SEMESTER, DESPITE PRIMIN' S WARNING THAT THIS WOULD NOT BE IN INTEREST OF COUNTRY' S STABILITY AND SECURITY, AND ADVICE OF RENOWNED PUBLISHER KUKRIT PRAMOJ. KUKRIT, WHO IS CLOSE TO THE ROYAL FAMILY, TOLD THE STUDENTS TO ACQUIRE MORE WISDOM BEFORE SOUNDING OFF ON AN IMPORTANT ISSUE LIKE THIS. KUKRIT, WHO HAS BEEN FREQUENTLY CRITICAL OF US, IN A VERY MODERATELY WORDED INTERVIEW STATED THAT AFTER HAVING BEEN HERE FOR YEARS, AMERICAN TROOPS COULD NOT BE REMOVED AS " EASILY AS TURNING OFF A SWITCH... BUT THE THING IS NOT TO LET ANYBODY ELSE IN AND IN TIME TO GET RID OF THE AMERICANS." THANAT' S DIATRIBE HAS CREATED A PUBLIC STIR, CERTAINLY IN POLITICAL AND DIPLOMATIC CIRCLES, AND IS DOMESTICALLY SIGNIFICANT BECAUSE IT IS CLEAR THAT HE WILL NOT BE SILENCED. IN SUM, THE ISSUE DOES NOT CURRENTLY PRESENT ACUTE PROBLEMS BUT CONTINUES TO FLARE UP OCCASIONALLY WITH ENOUGH INTENSITY TO REQUIRE RTG' S AND OUR CONTINUING CLOSE ATTENTION.

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